

OXFORD

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At Easter every year one scans the Demitting Proctors' and Assessor's Orations for insights – though probably not for revelations. They are the nearest we get to insider views of the inner workings of the central University. But one has to read between the lines because, as our three privileged representatives are about to revert to normal life on the periphery, they are inevitably still constrained by the code of secrecy that hangs so heavily over all such doings. In this year's speeches one senses a tension, between Oxford's unique status – an "extraordinary University" – as against the many adverse forces affecting all UK universities collectively. "[The] real-term [funding] decline is one sign that Britain – the society we are embedded in – does not love universities in the way it once did".

"The case for the transformational nature of this university and its educational values ... becomes harder to make if there is any vibe that universities are places where People Like Us bemoan Them Out There; public universities should never look down on the public." "We pursue equality, which is progress, but why not be bolder and pursue equity? One answer is a lack of capacity and resources. It is clear to many of us that we need to both identify new sources of revenue and do things more efficiently and effectively..."

"We have heard concerns this year that there are perceived jurisdictional gaps in the ways the University and colleges handle non-academic misconduct broadly defined." "I encourage the institution to think about ways to enhance the perceived legitimacy of the ways it handles both student and staff conduct..." "Oxford... has a problem that should not be ignored. But let me point out that this is not Oxford exceptionalism: sexual assault and harassment are a problem sector-wide." "[O]ur processes

ELECTION PROSPECTS

must not just be fair and efficient, but must be seen to be so."

"This is the University's major current and coming challenge; tensioning the needs of our overworked, underpaid staff and the costs of safe, adequate buildings... or our future financial commitments against the need to make up current shortfalls." Moreover,

"I wish more of our senior colleagues could have a turn on the [Staff Financial Support Fund] committee, and gain even more perspective on the day-to-day challenges of our staff. The foregone conclusion on some committees to add a few extra million GBP to the contingency budget of yet another construction project when costs overrun can be seen in a different light when you read that some of our staff and their children faced the winter with non-functional boilers... I hope the Pay and Conditions Review will bring some relief. As to what I learned the most this year; it had to be about hard choices and trade-offs." With reference to the Pay and Conditions Review the Senior Proctor concluded that: "we hope the optimism vested in it is realised."

The Senior Proctor ended the Orations with a warning. "Wondering how it felt to be a student in the last year... I consulted the University's webpages offering advice on the use of AI in learning". "The aim of the University's Digital Transformation project, ... is to free time and relieve frustration... But it is difficult to be entirely optimistic, remembering previous platforms which produced new obstructions, and innovations which imposed unwanted changes in academic practice... or online platforms for tests and exams, limited in comparison with the paper we are told we must leave behind." This was a "plea that the digital cart does not preposterously pull the academic horse." "Adaptation is necessary, as is realism about costs, but technology should follow academic need,

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...and much more

and not vice versa...” “For worse or better, this is not any other organisation; it is a university, and an extraordinary one. More active academics willing to serve on its central committees would help redress the balance.”

As the Assessor emphasised, “Efficient delivery of our undergraduate admissions tests each year, every year is – in my view – the single most important access activity we do...” – a focus that has become all the more important now that admissions interviews have been abandoned.

* * *

In this election year the political parties will need to make manifesto promises on their policies for universities. Now that 50% of school leavers are entering higher education they, and their parents, are a section of the electorate that cannot be ignored.

Fifty UK universities are thought to be in the process of cutting jobs in efforts to forestall bankruptcy. Faced with escalating costs of their Teachers Pensions Scheme the majority of post-92 universities are facing job cuts (*THE*, 11th April 2024); 86% of 43 UCU branches report actual or threatened redundancies this year, 12 reporting more than 50 jobs at risk, along with 70% cuts in research time and increasing casualisation. In some universities whole disciplines are under threat of closure, especially in the humanities. Given the steady decline in the value of domestic student tuition fees, which have not been allowed to increase with inflation since 2017, universities are perilously dependent on fees charged to overseas students, of which there are some 350,000. Overseas numbers are affected by government visa and immigration policies; Chinese students make up the greatest single contingent and are therefore the most susceptible to shifts in international sentiment. Some universities have recently suffered a more than 50% decline in overseas student numbers, and some have apparently had to lower their admissions standards.

Close to home (see Reminders), Oxford Brookes is abandoning its Music and Maths departments and some 50 academic posts are at risk (covering Anthropology, English, Drama, Creative Writing, History, Film, Publishing and Architecture). The options for a possible incoming

Labour government are severely limited and there is little appetite for radical reform (see Reminders). In order to safeguard regional economies mergers may be preferred to closure of campuses. At a time when more than a third in jobs filled by graduates do not require degrees and one in five graduates would be better off financially if they had not gone to university, new realities may affect how the value of a university education is perceived in the future.

On the horizon is the potential of global student unrest comparable to that of the 1960s in the context of the Vietnam war. By last weekend 40 US campuses were the scenes of mass student demonstrations in support of the Palestinians, often resulting in police (or even National Guard) intervention, deployment of tear-gas, and arrests. The demonstrators are demanding divestment from financial links to Israel. The implications for the Israel-Gaza war and for the forthcoming US elections, so far unclear, could be most significant.

The movement appears to have first taken hold at Columbia University when police were called in to remove an encampment of Pro-Palestinian protestors. The job security of the President, Baroness Nemat (“Minouche”) Shafik, DPhil, until recently Vice-Chancellor of LSE (2017-2023) – of Egyptian parentage – is perilous. The Speaker of the House of Representatives has called for her resignation. Having barely survived the same grilling in Congress on her university’s antisemitism policies that had already resulted in the resignation of the Presidents of Harvard and the University of Pennsylvania, she initially took a controversially firm line, sacking outspoken academics and issuing ultimatums to the encamped students. All on-site, in person teaching was cancelled. More recently she has been prolonging negotiations with the students and her stance has become unclear.

Such events are inseparable from the tensions and uncertainties surrounding the US Presidential election. In a context of mounting concerns about the impact and effects of digital misinformation, the free speech foundations of democracy are being tested as never before. Meanwhile, student occupations in support of Palestine are now starting on British campuses.

T.J.H

Correction

In Nicholas Bamforth’s article ‘A lawyer’s commentary’ (*Oxford Magazine*, Noughth Week Trinity Term, 2024, p.11) the reference in the first paragraph to ‘2022’ should have read ‘2002’, as was the case in later paragraphs



Reminders



The following message (dated 26th January 2024) was sent by their Vice-Chancellor to Oxford Brookes staff-eds

Like many institutions across the sector, the University is experiencing increasing financial challenges due to a range of external factors, such as inflation, flat student fees for UK undergraduates for over a decade, and increases in staff pay and employer pension contributions.

As a result, we took the difficult decision to begin a consultation in November about reducing staff posts in some specific academic areas, and to make other, pay-related staff cost savings across the University.

As part of the proposals announced in November, I announced a Voluntary Severance (VS) scheme for staff within some specific academic areas. The University received nine applications for VS from staff and all were accepted. As a result, a number of staff were removed from being at risk of redundancy before the festive break. However, despite these staff departures, the savings achieved as a result of VS applications have not been sufficient to achieve the University's required cost savings of £2 million per annum.

The staff consultation period ended on 17 January and the University's Vice-Chancellor's Group met earlier this week to carefully consider the staff responses, as well as feedback from students and other stakeholders within and outside the University, and reach a final decision on how the University will find the cost savings it needs. We are grateful to all those who responded.

The University received many suggestions from staff, students and external stakeholders for non-pay cost savings or revenue generating activities. The Vice-Chancellor's Group has discussed them all and regretfully concluded that none of them could achieve the level of savings required by the University in the necessary timeframe.

We regret that a small number of staff will now progress into a compulsory redundancy process. However, in some academic areas where staff reductions have been achieved through VS or voluntary reductions in working hours, the redundancy process will be suspended whilst a further VS scheme open to additional academic areas tests whether the remaining savings can be achieved through voluntary means.

Whilst I deeply regret the need to make any reductions in staff numbers, and that compulsory redundancies cannot be avoided for all affected staff, I hope that this decision demonstrates our willingness to listen to feedback and to make adaptations to our approach which reduce the impact on staff wherever possible.

Closure of the University's Music and Mathematics programmes

During the consultation, the Vice-Chancellor's Group received a large volume of correspondence regarding our proposal to close the Music and Mathematics programmes at Oxford Brookes, as well as petition signatures.

The last thing that any Vice-Chancellor or leadership team within a University wants to do is to stop teaching a valued subject. We began the consultation on these proposals because it is our responsibility, when savings cannot be made in other

ways, to protect the financial sustainability of the University by considering the future of programmes that do not attract sufficient numbers of students to enable them to make the necessary contribution to the University's overall finances.

Regretfully, the Vice-Chancellor's Group has therefore decided that the programme closure process will continue for Music and for Mathematics. There will be reductions in the use of Associate Lecturers in both programmes, but the salaried staff in Mathematics will remain in employment, teaching Mathematics within other programmes. At-risk staff on the Music programme who have not volunteered for VS and who are not needed to support the 'teach out' of the course in the coming years will now progress into a compulsory redundancy process.

I would like to emphasise that we remain committed to all of our current students, and will ensure that changes to staffing do not preclude our students from continuing and completing successfully on their programme of study. We will continue to update the student FAQs webpage to ensure timely and consistent information is made available, as well as access to our Student Support Services.

I recognise that this will continue to be a very challenging time for colleagues, particularly for those on the affected programmes. However difficult, these decisions have been taken in the best interests of the University going forward. We will continue to seek ways to mitigate the impact of this decision on staff, and to offer support to all those directly impacted.

There was a follow-up message dated 19th March 2024

In January, the Vice-Chancellor of Oxford Brookes University, Professor Alistair Fitt, issued a statement on the outcome of a University consultation on reducing staff posts in some specific academic areas, and making other, pay-related staff cost savings across the University.

Subsequently, the University offered an expanded Voluntary Severance (VS) scheme for staff within some additional academic areas, which allowed further staff to be removed from risk of redundancy.

Over this period, there have been a number of media reports on the increasing financial challenges being felt at a large number of UK universities, and these pressures continue to be felt here at Oxford Brookes, despite the savings that the University has made. As a result, the University has recently confirmed to staff that it will be launching a much wider VS scheme to achieve further cost savings.

We would like to emphasise that the University remains committed to all of our current and future students, and will ensure that changes to staffing do not preclude our students from continuing and completing successfully on their programme of study. Whilst the scheme is intended to maximise cost savings to the University, applications will be declined if closing a post would have an unacceptable impact on a team's ability to deliver their teaching and other key objectives, or on the workloads of their colleagues.

We will continue to support staff throughout this period. We will also update the student FAQs webpage in the coming days to ensure timely and consistent information is made available to our students.

*The following are extracts from HEPI Report 173
“How should undergraduate degrees be funded?”,
edited by Rose Stephenson, April 2024.*

From David Willetts’ contribution:

There are calls for a new model of university funding. But they must engage with two basic truths of university funding. First there is little political support for increased public funding of higher education – apart perhaps for bringing back some means-tested support, in the form of maintenance grants, and increases to the teaching grants for high-cost subjects, both of which would be a great help....

Secondly, graduates earn more than non-graduates. There are interesting arguments about why this is And there may be some decline in the graduate premium. But it remains the case that on average graduates earn more than non-graduates, so expecting graduates to pay back for their higher education is fairer and more progressive than expecting the generality of taxpayers to pay. However, if students had to pay upfront, as many do in the US, then we might deter young people from going to university. Instead, we should fund them first and then expect them to pay back if and when they can afford to. This is a sensible midpoint between a full market model and getting back into public spending and taxation. It is the model we have had for over 20 years now and I see no better alternative. Indeed, it is quite delicately balanced to avoid the twin perils of either moving to a commercial system or public spending....

The criticism of many areas of public policy now is the endless churn of new policies. But the basic higher education model has not changed much for over 20 years. There is no alternative model to replace it. But the real problem with the current system is that it has got completely fossilised....

The forthcoming general election presents a dilemma to both big political parties. They have to say something about higher education, but they do not want to nail their colours to any particular proposal now. A review of the calibration of the scheme is a way to avoid political traps now and give them maximum room for manoeuvre after the election.

From Jo Johnson’s contribution:

One of the great advantages of our student finance system is that sharing the cost of higher education between the student and the Exchequer has enabled the Treasury to lift student number controls and allowed the widening of participation to drive both social mobility and productivity growth in the UK economy. Reintroducing number controls is a policy that the UK might conceivably look at in 10 to 15 years’ time, when more progress has been made in terms of narrowing the participation gap and when we have better evidence of other drivers of productivity growth than rising levels of educational attainment. The participation gap is closing slowly, but in 2023 more than twice as many pupils in the most advantaged quintile

progressed to higher education than those from the most disadvantaged quintile.... To slam on student number controls today would not just be a serious moral failure but also a huge brake on our productive capabilities as a country and the very antithesis of levelling up....

Meanwhile, the arguments against a graduate tax remain as strong as they were back in the 1990s when Tony Blair pushed back hard against them and in 2009 when the Browne review sensibly dismissed the idea. The current system in England of income-contingent loan repayments is similar to a graduate tax, but one which is capped at a fixed price (you do not repay more than you have borrowed in real terms) and time-limited (outstanding loans are written off by the Exchequer after 40 years). It therefore has all the key benefits of a graduate tax – that students are not required to pay anything upfront and their contribution is linked to their earnings as graduates without the significant disadvantages that encourage students to engage in counterproductive avoidance behaviour....

We do not need a big review. The mechanism to link funding to quality exists already in law in the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 (HERA). One of its most important provisions allows fee caps to be set at differing levels based on a provider’s TEF award, subject to overall limits prescribed by regulations scrutinised by Parliament. We should make use of it. Institutions that deliver great teaching and student outcomes, as assessed by the fourth iteration of the Teaching Excellence Framework, results of which have recently published, should be allowed to raise fees, prospectively, in line with annual inflation, starting ideally with effect from the academic year 2024/25: job done....

An Open Letter to Sir Keir

The Anglo-American writer Lionel Shriver said recently that universities on both side of the Atlantic had lost their self-confidence. She is right. In the last four decades, universities have remained silent while all that they stand for has been dismantled around them, but the possible advent of a new government with a vast majority offers the opportunity to try for a re-set. Shriver's best-known book is 'We need to talk about Kevin'. Universities need to talk, not about, but to Keir. Here is an open letter as the first blast of the trumpet.

Dear Sir Keir,

Techniques of looking at UK elections developed forty years ago tell us that you will be a Prime Minister with a very substantial majority¹. The forthcoming General Election will be for the Conservatives a near extinction event.

It's not all good news. You will have to deal with their legacy. The last Labour Government left a message for the incoming Cameron Government: 'There is no money left'. And here we are again: high taxes already in place and still no money to do desirable things.

The universities understand that. I believe that, with some no-cost reforms, they can help. We have some ideas about general policy and about how higher education should be run. They will not increase costs; they may very well save you money.

A vast Parliamentary majority will let you act boldly. You and your Chancellor will have to cut public expenditure. You and the Chancellor might also think to cut the costs of the Civil Service. A vast network of quasi-civil servants set up by Cameron administers substantial area of national life from 'Offices'. None of these Offices are democratically accountable.

The track record of these Offices is appalling. Ofcom pretends to keep news media in check but cannot control streaming. OBR second guesses Chancellors who are now forced to obtain the agreement of an unelected body before putting their proposals before the elected members in Parliament². By making a bonfire of these inanities, you will also achieve educational benefits for children and young people. Ofsted causes significant anxiety for two thirds of all teachers, occasionally with fatal results.

OfS has greatly increased higher education costs for no operational gains. It has caused universities to recruit vast regiments of people whose sole purpose is to fill in the regulatory forms of OfS. OfS and TEF have ruined university teaching – teachers are now afraid of their students. REF has made a slow-motion train-wreck of university research. The life blood of innovation – individual curiosity tempered by peer group review – has been choked off in favour of sterile box-ticking.

But, of course, if you and the Chancellor just reduce expenditure, you will still not be able to do what needs to be done. Vital things like the NHS, defence, law and order, and social care will still need more money. That can only come from growth. Real growth needs new ideas, new techniques, and the interplay of competing notions

in finding in a timely manner new ways forward. In short, it needs universities.

The universities do not need more money. They just need a good old Nineteenth Century Labour virtue, a concept you should re-capture from Tory claims to embody it – freedom. Universities need to be free if they are to act in the national interest. They do not need watch-dogs and their futile barking up wrong trees. Managing difficult people who are imagining the future and reinterpreting the past needs a very light touch. It is inhibited by too much regulation. The best indication of research excellence is the citation indices which indicate what the rest of the world thinks in our work is important and interesting. The most effective measure of good teaching is students offering themselves to be taught. No armies of bean-counters, no forms and no norms are needed. Freedom is not only more effective; it is also cheaper, much cheaper.

Labour freedom should mean that nothing is prescribed by regulation imposed by 'Offices' without and bureaucrats within. University staff need to be free to think what they like, teach whom they choose, and in whatever manner they think effective. Students need to be free to choose by whom they will be taught.

Removing OfS, TEF and REF, and curtailing the bureaucracies within Higher Education they inevitably generate, will be both a liberation and a substantial cost saving. The savings can be made better by another financially aware reform. Give school-leavers who are qualified by exam results a voucher for fees redeemable at any university which will have them, and you will do two things; first, achieve an accurate and predictable accounting of the cost to the tax-payer (your Chancellor will bless you because she can limit the value or the number of vouchers according to the state of the economy. We must cut our 'academic gowns' according to our cloth).³ And, secondly, it will allow, perhaps even encourage, with no blame to the government, the closure of any course or institution which cannot attract students.

If elite places like Oxford and Cambridge insist that they need more money and still want to teach the brightest and the best, let them solve their own problems. Let them use their endowments, as the American do, to create bursaries. Bring British patent law into line with American patent law so that universities can sell their ideas for development without fear of putting the core Intellectual Property into a 'free-use' arena. The key reform needed to recreate freedom is that government doesn't try to tell universities what to research and how to teach.

That will help research but teaching too needs freedom. Don't let the Civil Service or guys from the big consultancy firms persuade you that they can measure university outputs like teaching. Ideas and the people who may have them and spread are not susceptible to measurement.⁴

Let me offer an educational parable based on truth. It tells us something about necessary teaching and about how the world really finds its future. The roll-book of a single Bristol primary school just over 100 years ago had three boys among its pupils: Bob Hope, Cary Grant and Paul Dirac⁵. All made world-famous careers in areas which didn't exist when they were at school. The Gov-

ernment Inspectors who monitored their education then could only say they had been taught to read, write and count. That was all they needed. They adapted to changing technology and novel ideas.

Universities are much the same. The Nobel Laureate Dorothy Crowfoot Hodgkin was among the first women to be admitted to Oxford. No one then could have predicted she would discover the structure of insulin. She said herself that up to a month before she made her breakthrough, she had ten years of apparent failure. In fact, she was learning all that time. She also, as a tutor, admitted a young woman called Marget Roberts to Somerville. Roberts helped to bring whippy ice cream to market, became a politician, and served as your predecessor as the first person to hold that office who had a science degree. Until Mrs Thatcher showed it was possible, most people at Oxford hoping to be a PM would have studied PPE or Literae Humaniores.

The blunt fact is no one knows what the future is, and therefore how or what we should be teaching to enable it. The Nobel Laureate Paul Dirac was already an undergraduate before Einstein published his theorem. No one could have introduced him to the Theory of Everything before then. There were no talking movies when Grant and Hope were at school.

No one now can say what we should be teaching in the universities or how we should be teaching it. TEF and REF are therefore twin nonsenses. Give the universities back their academic freedom – especially freedom from bureaucracy – and they will deliver the future for you. Repeal Mrs Thatcher's 1988 Act. Universities with the chains taken off their intellectual ankles will find the growth that could make your administration a notable one in the history of these islands. They are possibly the only group in society which can.

And, oh yes. Whatever the universities do, you will still need some good fortune. So good luck.

YOURS SINCERELY, DON CARLETON

1. The late Dr Gordon Reece (Eng. Maths, Bristol) used mathematical modelling to work out the likely outcome of 1980s elections. He could and did predict results to within 1 or 2 seats by looking at the vote shares, uneven patterns across the country and the impact of third parties. His conclusion was that a party getting less than 20% of the overall vote faced extinction with less than 100 seats and possibly as few as two. In other words, very like the fate of the Liberal Party in the 1920s in Britain and Canada's Conservatives in 1993.
2. A recent study by a leading American banker revealed that the 'independent Bank of England' should be added to the list. The BOE was found to be using technology so outdated that accurate predictions on the economy were impossible to achieve.
3. Vouchers are not a new idea. The concept dates back at least fifty years. Vouchers save money because they are easier to run. A standard is set – let us say a numeric value based on A level Grades or their equivalent. Let us say the points range from 1-20. Three or four top A level grades produces a score of 17+. Various forms of failure see scores in the range 8 to 1. Anyone who scores between 10 and 20 gets a voucher for a university place redeemable anywhere to a set value (eg £10,000). Top grades (16+) qualify for a 'King's Scholarship' which has value of £20,000 half of which is a non-returnable prize or grant. It is then up the universities to decide how to price their courses which need not be uniform even within one university. Theology or Agriculture do not need to be the same price as Economics or Physics.
4. The poet Louis MacNeice (Merton) was a BBC producer when the Management called in American consultants to tell them how to run British broadcasting, a monopoly at the time. The consultants noted he had not made a programme for some time. 'What have you been doing, Mr MacNeice', they asked. 'Thinking', he replied.
5. Peter Higgs (Nobel 2013) got his laureate for a 1964 paper. His theory was not confirmed by experiment until 2012. We simply don't know and can't predict when new ideas will emerge. They almost always emerge in universities, but we cannot say in advance which ones. Sometimes it is one of the small maverick unfashionable places.

Notes from Ivory Flats

ROBERT FOLEY

Annus sexaginta septum

As readers of *Notes from Ivory Flats* know, I retired from writing these articles last year, but appropriately enough I have dusted off my keyboard to write about the burning issue in Cambridge, the Employer Justified Retirement Age (EJRA). The about to be published Penty Report on the future of the EJRA will recommend retention (only for academics, not administrators), but raising the age from 67 to 69. Surprisingly, it hit a poetic nerve (with many apologies to Philip Larkin's *Annus Mirabilis*).

*For me retirement began
When I was sixty-three
(Which was rather young for me)
Between my intellectual master plan
And start of my last PhD.*

*Up to then there'd always been
A hope of lingering,
An endless email ping
A grant so large that it would mean
It'd pay for everything.*

*With EJRA there was no way back:
Everyone felt the same,
And every life became
A terrible waiting for the sack,
A quite unwinnable game.*

*So life was never better than
Before I was sixty-three
(Which was pretty good for me)
Between my intellectual master plan
And the start of my last PhD.*

Like sex for Philip Larkin¹, the removal of the EJRA – should it happen – will come too late for me. I retired in 2020, in the middle of Covid, so I went out with not even a whimper, let alone a bang. Retirement brought many responses. The strongest was of course, how on earth did I manage to get to be so old? What happened to all the time? Surely last time I checked I was celebrating finishing my PhD. But sadly, neither the mirror nor HR lie. Yes, many lectures, papers and emails had gone under the bridge since then.

I will confess there was also a twinge of pleasure at the thought of some of the things I would never have to do again – I think marking exams was at the top of my list, but of course that proved to be a forlorn hope, as the next year there was that 'can you help?' invitation. Fewer gentle reminders would be a blessing as well (how I long for the occasional brutal reminder).

But immediate responses gave way to more reflection – that is, less about me and more a recognition that enforced retirement is much worse – although they don't know it

yet as like me they think they are still just getting started – for my younger and much younger colleagues.

Two reasons immediately come to mind. The first is the obvious one, that the pension arrangements have deteriorated massively. I was lucky enough to have spent most of my career on the final salary scheme, so my pension, while not vice-chancellorian in scale, is not bad, and I have not had to scrounge off my children yet. The standard of living drop at retirement is likely to be increasingly precipitous for colleagues who are still a long way off retirement.

The second, although indirectly linked to pensions, runs more centrally through academic careers today. I was appointed to a permanent lectureship at the age of 24, after my PhD; this was not uncommon, and a single post-doc might lead to a 'proper job'. For my generation this was quite normal, and tenure well before thirty a typical trajectory, not a signal of genius. I do not have any hard data, but enough experience with all the PhD students and post-docs I have known over the last twenty years or so shows that this is no longer the case. Now, two, three, four post-docs are quite the norm. This means that a permanent job, if it comes at all, does so around 35. After the hurly-burly of the post-doc, the deep peace of tenure may arrive, but late in life.

What, you may ask, has this to do with the EJRA? Well, my secure, fully independent, career lasted 43 years, time enough to build it, have a family, and work on a longer time-scale. Not to mention accumulate a full pension. In the brave new world of Ivory Flats, that is greatly reduced, and has enormous costs.

There are fundamental ones. Post-doc life is often peripatetic, moving from university to university, if not country to country. This delays 'life' – both the security and money to buy a house, and the delay to starting a family. For many women, this means the window for having children is dangerously narrow and rapidly closing. For men too, late thirties and forties is leaving it pretty late if they want to be able to play football with the kids without a serious back injury. I often wonder about all those teenage children of academics out there, eying anxiously their greying and exhausted parents. The timescale of academic life with security has been drastically shortened, and it is the EJRA that is now out of sync with reality.

There are clearly financial implications. Mortgages are impossibly high now for buyers of any age, but first-time buyers in particular. As a result, these are often for longer periods of time to have the remotest hope of paying them off, but this slams abruptly up against the retirement age of 67. The double-whammy of having a reduced pension while still trying to pay the mortgage has to hurt.

And, of course, the pension – much less time to build this up, with a much smaller pot and income at the end of it, built, incidentally, on a declining level of real income – 20% drop in the last fifteen years or so, exacerbated by the recent high rates of inflation.

A good university manager might well say all that has

nothing to do with them – children, mortgages, other people's problems (as indeed they are, as I understand at Oxford and soon to be at Cambridge, administrators do not have to retire). What matters is the work.

But work – both from the point of view of the university and the academic – is as much a victim of the EJRA. One of the most powerful frameworks in evolutionary biology is life history theory. How an organism partitions its life from conception to death – gestation, infant independence, adulthood, first reproduction, senescence – is not exactly mathematically formulaic, but it is subject to some interesting rules. For most animals it might be summed up as live fast, die young.

But where adult mortality can be kept down, then it pays to grow more slowly, invest in production rather than reproduction, and live longer. Humans, of course, with their very long childhood and extended longevity represent this strategy to a T.

If we look at academic life through the lens of life history theory, then for my generation it was more of the live fast die young – or less bleakly, start early (well, tenure early), finish early, retire. But the twenty-first century evolution of academic life has changed that. Now the developing academic has a prolonged period of adolescence – those endless post-docs. This should correlate with a greater longevity – that would be the natural consequence. However, at that end of the career, the EJRA comes down prematurely, producing a shortened longevity more suitable for another age.

This may be a far-fetched analogy, but biology teaches us that you can't change one end of the life history without changing the other. And it is, perhaps, more than just a metaphor, as real longevity has increased. I am increasingly cheered to read the obituary notices published in the *Reporter*, where emeritus professors regularly peg out in their nineties. Academics, along with other professionals, have not only longer lifespans, but also continue in good health for longer. Retirement at 67 – or even 69 – goes against the demographic trends that underlie so many changes in society. This, of course, has been fully recognised by government legislation for years, for both practical reasons and ones of principle relating to age discrimination.

So individuals suffer from compulsory retirement (or sacking, as the militant wing of the anti-EJRA movement call it), but so too does the university as an institution. Most good employers see their staff like good wine – improving with age. Well, with experience, at least. The longer the investment, the bigger the returns. While it is true that not all academics are at their best in their late sixties, many are, and are certainly able to contribute to the university in ways that only come with experience. This is all lost – leadership, grant income, a breadth of teaching, a longer term perspective and institutional memory, mentoring. They are also often the ones to attract the post-docs and PhD students, even if the benefits are then spread more widely among their colleagues. All that is lost.

A university full of creaking dons would not be a good idea, but we surely live in a world where diversity and inclusivity is valued, and age – a balanced demography – should be part of that.

What can be done? Ultimately there are three players in this game – The University, Old Farts, and Young Turks. By the University I of course mean 'senior management' and the administration. From their point of view, the problem

is already well towards solution – remove the retirement age for themselves and, as discussed in so many *Notes from Ivory Flats*, make the research time-budget conditions of academics challenging enough that they will cut notches on their office walls to mark off the number of days to retirement. But the longer-term costs of this are all too easy to see. Inevitably there is poorer senior recruitment – who would come to Cambridge in their late fifties, often an age of maximum productivity and leadership potential, knowing there is only a decade to go, while other universities offer open ended contracts? Grant income, either direct or by providing that key element of the REF, a good environment, is lost, and with that, employment opportunities for early career researchers. Morale is already low across academia, but the EJRA saps it further; my own experience is that as one's end approaches one is increasingly left out of activities and decision making ("I'm sure you'll understand if we leave you out of this one – this isn't going to affect you"), and one becomes a professorial version of Doc Daneeka in *Catch 22*², there in the flesh but not really recognised as existing. Institutional memory, increasingly important among academics as the inflow of administrators continues apace, is lost. And what is the point of all those leadership courses (how much do they cost?) if leadership is suddenly curtailed? And less visible, but equally important, is the damage to the university's reputation as a place that values diversity.

The Old Farts are expectedly not a homogenous group. There are certainly some who either can't wait to fill in their last risk assessment for going to a conference in Leeds (dangerous place) and cultivate their geraniums before hitting the gin and tonics at lunch time. Some of these are often also altruistically keen to give up their place to a younger generation. I admit to a certain amount of sympathy to this view (and the gin and tonics) – I do not want to take the bread from my children's mouth, speaking both metaphorically and literally. But that sympathy is constrained by the knowledge that in practice what is happening at the younger end of the game is not symmetrical – the reduction in academic staffing levels and casualisation of the higher education sector is advancing steadily. The relationship between forced retirement and recruitment of early career academics is partial at best.

Others, however, remain fully active, successful and even popular among their colleagues and students, and keen and qualified to carry on for years. This might be dismissed as simply perpetuating another case of baby-boomer selfishness, monopolising resources that should be transferred to younger generations. However, leaving aside all the reasons already aired here – the shorter academic life span, the longer actual lifespan, the age discrimination – the forced retirement age reflects badly on an uncaring and unsubtle employer.

We hear a lot these days about Early Career Researchers, ECRs, and their need for supporting, mentoring, career development, as befits a caring institution. There is nothing, however, about LCRs (late career researchers), who are instead dispatched peremptorily, often after decades of service and filling the university's coffers.

All careers must end, so it is not just a question of abolishing the EJRA and all will be well. Enoch Powell, not someone I often quote, said that all political careers end in failure, and a simple *laissez-faire* approach would result in similar inevitable failure as Professor Bloggs is wheeled

out in a fog of confusion having emailed the exam questions to all the students.

Devoting some attention to a more flexible, tailored and sympathetic approach to end of career strategies for LCRs should not be beyond the talents of the university administration. Universities do need to do some planning, and individuals differ in their goals. A discussed or even negotiated plan of tapering off (or indeed straightforward retirement) would be in everyone's interests, and would not require some blunt instrument all career 'performance management'. This would make the interests of the University and the Old Farts – sorry, LCRs – mutualistic.

Views among the Young Turks are also equally mixed. There are those who are in favour of the EJRA for entirely rational if often personal reasons. "Quite happy to see the EJRA go, as long as it doesn't happen before Professor X retires!" is a refrain likely to be heard in many departments. Certainly rejuvenating departments has to be a good thing. Fields need change, and some younger colleagues may quite reasonably feel that the EJRA is a crude but effective tool for achieving this.

However, Young Turks must have ambitions to become Old Farts, or at least Old Turks, with all the attendant problems of a curtailed and shortened life history that I

outlined earlier. Many I have spoken to, particularly in the sciences, recognise the shortcomings of an EJRA, that the costs are greater than the benefits. While some of this may be future self-interest, what drives many of them is that they feel they will still be able to contribute significantly, to the University, to their students, and to society more broadly.

What is perhaps surprising, but reassuring, is that it is loyalty to the institution that often motivates the desire to keep working. However, whether that loyalty will be eroded by an increasingly managerial university over the next two decades or so remains to be seen, or whether by then they will only be too pleased to take to their caravans (can't afford hotels) and go walkabout. The loss will be the University's.

1. See Philip Larkin's poem 'Annus Mirabilis' (<https://allpoetry.com/Annus-Mirabilis>)
2. Doc Daneeka hates flying but likes getting his flight pay, so puts his name on a flight without boarding. The plane crashes, and as far as the Air Force is concerned he is dead, even though he wanders freely around the base.

How to initiate Congregation actions

How to trigger a debate or discussion in Congregation

It is open to any 20 or more members of Congregation to propose a resolution or topic for discussion at a meeting of Congregation; requests must be made in writing to the Registrar not later than noon on the 22nd day before the relevant meeting. Any 2 or more members of Congregation can submit an amendment to, or announce an intention to vote against, a resolution or a legislative proposal (*i.e.* a proposal to amend the statutes). Notice must be given to the Registrar (in writing) not later than noon on the 8th day before the meeting.

Questions and replies

Any 2 or more members of Congregation may ask a question in Congregation about any matter concerning the policy or the administration of the University. Requests must be submitted to the Registrar (in writing) not later than noon on the 18th day before the Congregation meeting at which it is to be asked. The question and the reply (drafted by Council) will be published in *Gazette* in the week prior to the relevant meeting. The answer is also formally read out at the meeting. Supplementary questions are allowed.

Postal votes

Attendance at meetings of Congregation tends to be low. Postal voting can potentially allow opinion to be easily accessed more widely across Congregation membership. Congregation can trigger a postal vote after a debate (but not after a discussion or a question and reply where no vote is taken). 25 or more members of Congregation have to be present ("on the floor") at the relevant debate. The request must be made by 4pm on the 6th day after the debate, signed by 50 members of Congregation, in writing to the Registrar. Council can also decide to hold a postal ballot, by the same deadline.

Flysheets

To generate a flysheet for publication with the *Gazette*, the camera-ready copy (2 sides maximum) should be submitted with at least 10 signatures on an indemnity form (obtainable from the Registrar) by 10am on the Monday in the week in which publication is desired.

Regulations governing the conduct of business in Congregation can be found at: <http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/statutes/regulations/529-122.shtml>

Items placed on the agenda for Congregation are published in the *Gazette*.

The Congregation website is at: www.admin.ox.ac.uk/councilsec/governance/congregation.

Advice on Congregation procedures is available from the Council Secretariat on request (email: congregation.meeting@admin.ox.ac.uk).

Qualified to teach?

G.R.EVANS

Many years ago, looking about me for a job after graduation, I took the Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) Oxford then offered. A national requirement for teachers to be 'qualified' was about to be imposed and it seemed a wise move. The required term was spent in an actual school. In the staff room one speedily learned not to sit in the favourite armchair of the Head of the English Department or to demand to see the Headmistress. After a year or two of discovering that I was too young and inexperienced to keep order in a classroom, I found my way into university teaching by way of a doctorate.

There I discovered that there was no requirement to have a higher education teaching qualification. Indeed there was none to be had. When, after gaining some lecturing experience in Reading and Bristol, I became a University Teaching Officer in Cambridge. No one ever enquired into my teaching ability. Such Offices expect their holders to engage in both teaching and research and the research has been readily measurable when it comes to the RAE, now the REF. During the term when the Quality Assurance Agency was due to inspect the History Faculty I happened to be on sabbatical so I remained unexamined.

Cambridge requires of its University Teaching Officers only a minimum thirty lectures a year,¹ though still 'less' may exceptionally be permitted. This modest number is justified by the expectation that the lectures will be informed by the current research. Attendance at one's lectures is a matter of student choice and only the continuing presence of an audience measures one's success. Cambridge supervisions, like Oxford's tutorials, require other skills, of debate and criticism rather than the imparting of knowledge. There was no guidance and no clue about the satisfactoriness of one's performance other than what could be read from students' faces, though if one fell from a College's list of preferred supervisors one might infer poor feedback.

By contrast, both Oxford and Cambridge now employ a variety of 'professionally qualified' staff in their administrative services. Cambridge went through a not uncontroversial constitutional process to set up its Unified Administrative Service in the 1990s, as suggested by the *Wass Syndicate*.² There was academic suspicion that this was an attempt to take the 'management of the University' away from the Regent House as its governing body. The Council urged the Registry's view that 'those academic staff involved in the management process need more developed and more professional administrative support and training'. It argued in a *Notice* of 2001 that:

*'provision of administrative services should be at the highest levels of professional expertise and effectiveness and the Council recognize that this requires there to be a clear policy towards professional and career development for administrative staff.'*³

The UAS duly got its mentions as a Division in the *Stat-*

utes and Ordinances, with University Offices for its senior members.

Oxford now uses the title 'Professional Services and University Administration'⁴ for its UAS and lists providers of 'training and development'.⁵ There is a 'Centre for Teaching and Learning' for academics with courses provided by IT, Libraries and Exams and Assessment.⁶ These are modest in their offerings by way of providing a route to a qualification. In 'Libraries', for example, there is a 'tool' for creating Oxford Reading Lists Online (ORLO).⁷ Training academics to teach is not on the list.

Government and accreditation of providers of teacher training

Universities are themselves commonly engaged in teacher-training even though they may neglect to provide personal training in higher education teaching for their lecturers. There is a Universities' Council for the Education of Teachers (UCET) whose 'members are UK universities involved in teacher education', also 'a number of colleges of higher education in the university sector'.⁸ Some Further Education Colleges now have degree-awarding powers as do many 'alternative providers'⁹ and a variety of routes for Initial Teacher Training continues to expand, including for teaching in Further Education. They include 'school-centred' training in which the training largely goes on in a school with time allowed for study;¹⁰ there may be training in Further Education alongside a job; and the new Postgraduate Teaching Apprenticeship leading to Qualified Teacher Status.¹¹

Government supervises teacher training. *Teacher Education and Training* (HMSO, 1972), the 'James Report', sought to create a single system to bring together routes to qualification provided by the two-year Teacher Training Colleges (extended to three years), and the one-year postgraduate courses. The *Report* did not consider teachers in higher education. It gave a section to Further Education Teachers but concluded that their training did not need more than appropriate adjustments to the requirements for secondary school teachers. (Qualified Teacher Learning and Skills (QTLS) status has since become the expectation for Further Education, and also qualifies for teaching in schools). The 1972 *Report* proposed two 'cycles', of which the first would be a degree or a Diploma in Higher Education requiring some mastery of subject content, with the second concentrating on the skills needed for teaching it.

From 1983 Government controlled the award of Qualified Teacher Status through the Department of Education and Science. A Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (CATE) was to assess providers. A Teacher Training Agency was established in 1994, and was replaced in 2005 by a Training and Development Agency

for Schools. In 2011 that was replaced in its turn, after a White Paper of 2010 on *The Importance of Teaching*. A White Paper of 2015-6, *Educational Excellence Everywhere* got nowhere and its proposals for teacher training reform were lost. In early 2017 concerns were being raised about the adequacy and future of teacher training.¹² Recruitment was falling, particularly in certain subjects and in certain parts of the UK.¹³

Evidence to the House of Commons Education Committee, *Recruitment and retention of teachers* in 2016-7¹⁴ included claims that the demand for teachers in England was not currently being met and there was 'a particular shortfall in recruitment targets in many secondary subjects', also that 'the rapid introduction of the School Direct programme' had not improved matters.¹⁵

The number of degree-awarding bodies has now expanded enormously with the Government encouragement of 'alternative' (private) providers. The Commons Committee on Public Accounts took a look at *Alternative Higher Education Providers* in its session of 2017-19. It was suggested in evidence that 'quality of teaching was the top reason why people were whistleblowing'.¹⁶ Nicola Dandridge said that proposed new 'registration conditions' would 'look at the quality of teaching, non-continuation rates and standards' and the new Office for Students would 'have a whole range of interventions, and potentially sanctions'.¹⁷

In 2021 there was a proposal to reform teacher training provision and impose new accreditation requirements, limiting the freedom of training providers to design their own syllabus and assessment criteria and creating an Institute of Teaching.¹⁸ Accredited providers objected. Oxford and Cambridge both threatened to stop providing teacher training courses.

Various adjustments have been attempted. The policy of urging new graduates to 'Teach First' helped encourage some expansion of the role of schools in teacher training' and through School Direct. There was also an endeavour to persuade graduates in certain subjects into teaching, especially STEM, where there was a range of alternative employment options open to them. There was enthusiasm for the Qualified Teacher status to be replaced by an 'Accredited Teacher Status' which would require a period of experience to follow the initial qualification. However enquiries continue on the same repeated concerns, including one in 2023 on *Teacher recruitment, training and retention*.¹⁹ In April 2024 *Times Higher Education* was asking once more whether universities had 'failed teacher education'.²⁰

Meanwhile Government criteria for accreditation of providers of teacher training are amended year by year. For example those for the academic year 2024/25 must 'incorporate a new set of Quality Requirements'. Students accepted for a course leading to Qualified Teacher Status are expected to have good English and Maths GCSE results and a science subject, and a first degree from a United Kingdom higher education institution or an equivalent qualification.²¹ They are subject to criminal record and health checks (with due adjustments in order to avoid discrimination). There are published Teachers' *Standards*²² which include setting expectations of pupils and manage behaviour, promoting good progress, having 'good subject and curriculum knowledge', manage assessment well, 'demonstrate consistently high standards of personal and professional conduct'.

An accredited provider of initial teacher training may validate the courses offered by others which are not themselves accredited. Provider accreditation is therefore important and may be financially desirable to a would-be provider. Post-1992 universities are especially dependent on income from their teacher training courses but they are financially valuable to Russell Group institutions too. Nevertheless the attraction of such courses is reported to be uncertain:

*'A government target to recruit 35,540 students on to postgraduate certificate in education (PGCE) courses in 2023-24 was missed by 38 per cent, with only half the required number of secondary school trainees recruited.'*²³

A body with degree-awarding powers has autonomous authority over its own awards, but QTS qualifications are not degrees and Government may remove a provider's accreditation or seek to interfere with the content of a teacher training course. The current 'accreditation criteria' remain in force until August 2024²⁴ when they will be replaced by the criteria for the following year.²⁵ The Department of Education has conducted a 'market review' of the provision of teacher training, leading to 'de-accreditation' of thirteen providers,²⁶ whose courses will no longer offer Qualified Teacher Status at primary or secondary school level. Providers have reason to fear the withdrawal of their accreditation if they fail to comply with one of the specified criteria or fail in financial management or governance or required reporting or if their Qualified Teacher Status provision is found to 'require improvement' or to be of 'lower quality'.²⁷

With validation available de-accreditation may be of limited effect. Greenwich, one of those deemed uncompliant, has been able to continue to offer teacher education into the next academic year by forming a partnership with an accredited provider, the University of Derby. Newcastle University has acted as accredited provider for PGCE students at Durham. Partnerships have been formed between Warwick and Cumbria; Chichester and Sussex; Sheffield Hallam and the University of the West of England; Worcester and East Anglia.²⁸

Teaching-only roles in higher education

Recently 'teaching-only' academic posts have begun to multiply, raising more directly the question of the holder's competence to teach and the difficulty of assessing it. Cambridge has recently added to its traditional 'teaching-and-research' Offices the new category of Teaching and Scholarship²⁹ in which the emphasis is heavily on teaching. This struggles to define 'performance' for the purposes of measuring the progression of postholders on the new 'Teaching and Scholarship Pathway'.

Begging every question arising in its wording, especially 'effective', Cambridge's expectations are listed. The successful teacher 'consistently delivers excellent teaching that benefits from and engages with Cambridge's research-rich environment and is intellectually challenging'; makes 'an effective contribution to curriculum development and enhancement'; evidences 'scholarly engagement with the development of good practice in teaching and learning' and participates effectively 'in strategic or developmental initiatives at disciplinary, Faculty or Uni-

versity levels'.³⁰ In any case, 'it is recognised that effective contributions may differ between disciplines and that an applicant's contribution is therefore to be assessed in the context of their Department/Faculty's expectations'.³¹

Among Russell Group providers Birmingham University offers a 'suite' of 'courses in higher education learning and teaching'. This will enable those who take them to 'identify and understand some key aspects of the higher education context in which they will be teaching'; 'consider some general approaches to teaching and supporting learning'; 'begin to explore practical approaches to teaching', with special reference to the needs of 'the increasingly diverse student community'.³²

Alternative providers may provide teacher training, but again not focussed on the needs of teaching in higher education. The London School of Management Education³³ offers 'affordable and high-quality' teacher training among its courses. This consists in a Pearson one-year Level 5 Diploma in Education and Training:

*'based on structures recognised by the Education and Training Foundation (ETF), a government-approved standards body, supporting the further education (FE) and skills workforce on their professional journey. The qualification is designed to meet the requirements for those in the post-compulsory education and training sector.'*³⁴

The Teaching Excellence Framework

A new Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) published its first results for providers of higher education in 2017. The TEF is now the responsibility the Office for Students but it began as a Government initiative. The Department for Education sets the ratings. A Gold rating means 'provision is consistently outstanding and of the highest quality found in the UK Higher Education sector'; Silver that 'provision is of high quality, and significantly and consistently exceeds the baseline quality threshold expected of UK Higher Education' and Bronze means that 'provision is of satisfactory quality'. Participation in the TEF is voluntary.

Measurements depend heavily on the judgments of the National Student Survey, with figures for non-continuation derived from HESA and success in gaining employment from its Graduate Outcomes survey. The OfS ratings of the student experience at providers for 2023³⁵ based on both 'excellent teaching' (undefined) and 'student outcomes' gave the majority of the 227 participating providers Silver.³⁶

Conclusion

The Government's 'career' advice for the would-be 'higher education lecturer' remains vague, suggesting those who obtain such a post will 'be expected to do a teaching qualification soon after' beginning and that 'this is normally offered by your university and is done while working'.³⁷ Even if it is so offered 'internally' it cannot lead to Qualified Higher Education Teacher Status.

If I was beginning an academic career now it seems I would be no better off by way of available provision to teach me how to teach in higher education and I would

be working alongside colleagues who were also having to work it out for themselves.

1. Special Ordinance under Statute C (ix), 5.
2. <https://www.lib.cam.ac.uk/university-archives/glossary/wass-syndicate>
3. *Reporter*, 18 June 2001.
4. <https://staff.admin.ox.ac.uk/structure-and-organisation/professional-services-and-university-administration>
5. <https://staff.admin.ox.ac.uk/training-and-development-providers-staff>
6. <https://www.ctl.ox.ac.uk/sessions-in-nexus365-panopto-orlo-inspera>
7. <https://www.ctl.ox.ac.uk/orlo>
8. <https://www.ucet.ac.uk/>
9. <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/the-register/degree-awarding-powers-orders-made-by-the-ofs/>
10. <https://www.teachfirst.org.uk/school-centred-initial-teacher-training>
11. <https://www.ucas.com/teaching-option/postgraduate-teaching-apprenticeship>
12. John Cater, 'Whither teacher education and training', *HEPI Report*, 95 (17 April, 2017).
13. John Cater, 'Whither teacher education and training', *HEPI Report*, 95 (17 April, 2017).
14. The House of Commons Education Committee, *Recruitment and retention of teachers* (2016-7): Fifth Report of Session 2016-17, HC199, 2017, <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmeduc/199/199.pdf>
15. <http://data.parliament.uk/WrittenEvidence/CommitteeEvidence.svc/EvidenceDocument/Education/Supply%20of%20teachers/written/24708.html>
16. House of Commons Committee on Public Accounts *Alternative Higher Education Providers* Twenty-Third Report of Session 2017-19, <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmpu-bacc/736/736.pdf>, Q.55, Layla Moran.
17. House of Commons Committee on Public Accounts *Alternative Higher Education Providers* Twenty-Third Report of Session 2017-19, <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmpu-bacc/736/736.pdf>.
18. <https://getintoteaching.education.gov.uk/>
19. <https://committees.parliament.uk/work/7357/teacher-recruitment-training-and-retention/publications/>
20. <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/depth/have-universities-failed-teacher-education>
21. *Education (School Teachers' Qualifications) (England) Regulations*, 2003.

22. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/61b73d6c-8fa8f50384489c9a/Teachers__Standards_Dec_2021.pdf
23. *Times Higher Education*, 11 April, 2024.
24. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65ccad-fa13054900118679d0/2023-24_ITT_criteria_and_supporting_advice.pdf
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26. <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/depth/have-universities-failed-teacher-education>
27. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/initial-teacher-training-criteria>
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32. <https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/as/hefi/teaching-learning-cpd/ilt/ilt001.aspx>
33. <https://lsme.ac.uk/>
34. <https://lsme.ac.uk/courses/diplomas/level-5-diploma-in-education-and-training/>
35. <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/news-blog-and-events/blog/that-s-a-wrap-tef-2023-final-results-published/>
36. <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/the-tef/>
37. <https://nationalcareers.service.gov.uk/job-profiles/higher-education-lecturer>

Tave(r)ner's Homage to Navalny

Westron wynde when wyllle thou blow

Where dost thou go my child, why run so swiftly

Art has protecting veils, innocence never.
He'll come no more; no breath at all to sing.
Why should a rat... If probity wings endeavour
and right is might, why do truth's benedictions
take lifetimes to alight, so tardily bring
fresh olive sprigs to palms outstretched so long?

Thus was I defasid and to deth chasid

Red east, pale occident take the knee or stand
in homage to him, humorous quasi-saint
of harnessed terror and joy, whose scarified hand
groped in our entrails, grasping their visceral fictions.
Do not tyrannic roses lose their scent
of blood, worn by a scion without taint?

Blow westron wynde Everything has a price

We two, like him, though both one of a kind
were of one kind, flaring the heart with our gleams,
with bouts of repletion and inanition the mind,
fasting and fullness, freedoms and constrictions,
extremities of one will, cataracts, flames,
acuties and expansions, acts and dreams.

and we should pay that price blow winter wind

So if in us, new friend, two voices blend
sweetness and anger, desire to hurt and heal
in dissonant drift before the disfiguring end,
bound as we are to music's contradictions
we jubilate that the icy venomous swell
bears on its crest your bright unbroken scale.

O wynde o westron wynde when wyllle thou blow

CARL SCHMIDT

*Title Reference is to John Taverner (c. 1490-1545) and John Tavener (1944-2013), English composers, and to Alexei Navalny (1976-2024), Russian patriot. **Epigraphs:** i. from a popular Tudor song preserved in BL MS Royal Appendix 58, f. 5r, the basis of John Taverner's 'Western Wind' Mass-setting. ii. from 'Lament of the Mother of God' (Great Compline of Holy Friday), set by John Tavener. **Refrains:** i. 'Thus was I defasid', from 'Wofully araide', a poem set to music by John Taverner's older contemporary William Cornysh ii. *Everything has a price and we should pay that price* (Alexei Navalny). The word *jubilate* recalls the sense of Latin *jubilare*, a term used by C16th Continental writers to describe the exultant 'florid' style of English music such as Taverner's.

Carl Schmidt was formerly Senior English Tutor and is now Emeritus Fellow at Balliol College, Oxford. His last book was *Passion and Precision: Collected Essays on English Poetry from Geoffrey Chaucer to Geoffrey Hill* (2015).

University governance

Sir – It is doubtless unusual, perhaps even unprecedented, for a correspondent to address you twice in successive issues – with two very different concerns. No more so, however, than the extraordinary hiccup perpetrated in this past Easter vacation by the University authorities.

On 21st March the *OU Gazette* No. 5416 was published. Under the heading “Council of the University” were listed six items, at least one of them [viz. “Employment of University Staff (to enable the title of Professor of Practice to be used)"] highly controversial in character. Twenty-four hours later, on 22nd March, *Gazette* No. 5416 re-appeared with four of these six items – including the controversial one – deleted, and the following explanatory note added:

“The 21 March edition of the Gazette has been republished to remove certain items from the Council and Main Committees section which were not yet approved for publication. These items will now appear in the 16 May edition of the Gazette, assuming that they are approved by Council”.

How on earth could the *Gazette* have come to report these items *two full months* before their scheduled authorization? The answer is obvious, isn’t it? The two-month interval reflects the rarity of Council meetings. The editorial slip-up reflects the fact that

TO THE EDITOR

the *Gazette*, like Council itself; shows the increasingly dysfunctional trends in our supposedly democratic governance. The whole episode illustrates to perfection who nowadays runs the University.

Yours sincerely,
PETER OPPENHEIMER
Christ Church

Sackler

Sir – The Sackler Library is now by statute stripped of its name, and become (I had to look this up as always) ‘The Bodleian Art, Archaeology and Ancient World Library’.

One wonders why this sesquipedalian appellation was chosen. Who is going to say ‘I am off to the ‘Bodleian etc.’ ‘Ba’al’, ‘Bawl’, even ‘Bowel’ have been suggested as alternatives, but these could be misunderstood. Why on earth did the Curators not revert to its original name, ‘Ashmolean’, which is after all where it is?

Yours sincerely,
ANGUS BOWIE
Queens College

The pub in Kenmare, Kerry

A bunch of us blow-ins
went into the mirrored pub –
an air of unwelcome.

The woman behind the bar
didn’t look up as she took
our uncertain orders.

She reached for a bottle
without glancing behind,
poured it, blank faced.

Short of words we waited.
but then she came alive,
looked me in the eye.

‘Who dyed your hair?’
she said, and I replied
that I couldn’t recall.

And that was it. Silence
again fell. But somehow
the mood shifted.

We walked into the day
with a lightness of being,
as if forgiven our sins.

Note: Kenmare in Kerry has many pubs and most have an air of welcoming conviviality. The pub in my poem was an exception and the woman famous for her taciturnity.

Beyond the Skylight

Mostly I dream I fly through the sky-light
feet first for ease, up into the panther night.
But this slow dawn gives something else –
a tautness in the pearly air, a faint twang
that excites and presages a strange event
even I cannot have concocted.

Balanced on a chair, sky-light boldly open
I breathe the earthy kindness of early day,
hear toneless fox-barks, an owl’s complaint,
three loud caws from a roof-top jackdaw,
low rumours murmur across the valley,
prequel to the great fly-past.

Then it comes, a vast teardrop-shaped cloud
not locusts but crows, airborne a capella,
cruising the current but holding formation,
an aerial flotilla blacking the morning sky
for more than thirty seconds, wing beats
a steady continuo to their cries.

Nightmares sweep away with the squadron
as the flyers dissolve into the distance
and garden birds resume their small matters.
Lightness of being, something like happiness,
is the gift the crows leave, like an echo.
The day begins with a kind of joy.

MO BROWNE

Mo Browne was the winner of the 2013 Mervyn Peake Poetry Prize, and has had poems published in the *Oxford Magazine* and in the anthology *Spirit of People and Place: Chelbury Poets Write Again* (Walcott Books, 2020). She lives in Chipping Norton.

REVIEWS

Things fall apart

John Bowers, *Downward Spiral* (Manchester University Press, 2024). £20.



Peter Viggers's Duck House

Yes, but why was a book by the Principal of an Oxford College not published by Oxford University Press? It's odd. Some reviewers reading the books to be reviewed highlight passages to be incorporated with magic markers. I don't, but if I did almost the whole book would be yellow and this article would be excessively long. So only a selection from this excellent survey can be managed here. John Bowers considers the character of modern administrative life, and comes to the conclusion that it is in a bad way. The title suggests that things have got, and are getting, worse, and there is plenty of evidence to support his case.

He is concerned not only with the facts of political life but the public perception of those facts. A Gallup poll in 1944 found that 35% of voters thought that politicians were in public life for themselves, while in November 2021 this had risen to 63%. Overall, 43% of the public think that standards of conduct today are worse than five or ten years ago. The Hansard Society's *Audit of Political Engagement* in 2019 begins:

'Opinions of the system of governing are at their lowest point in 15 years – worse now than in the aftermath of the MP's expenses scandal which broke in 2009. The public are pessimistic about the country's problems and their solution, with sizeable numbers willing to entertain radical political changes as a result.'

Bowers recognises that in recent years conditions have changed, and the electronic media have made personalities and events much more visible and available than previously. It came too recently for his study, but we can now turn, if we wish, to the disgraceful scene on 21 February in the Commons when the Speaker, Sir Lindsay Hoyle, failed to act in accordance with well-established traditions of procedure in the debate on Gaza.

What is perceived to be under threat is the traditional situation described by Orwell in 'England, Your England' (1941):

'Here one comes upon an all-important English trait: the respect for constitutionalism and legality; the belief in 'the law' as something above the state and the individual, something which is cruel and stupid of course but at any rate incorruptible.'

A little later in the essay he speaks of collective instinct:

'But they [the English] have a certain power of acting without taking thought. Their world-famed hypocrisy – their double-faced attitude towards the Empire, for instance – is bound up with this. In moments of supreme crisis the whole nation can suddenly draw together and act upon a species of instinct, really a code of conduct which is understood by almost everyone, though never formulated.'

There is something elusive and even arcane in the way the law works. One would like to have been a fly on the wall when Lord Patten attempted to explain to the Mandarins two types of law:

'I had to spend some time trying to explain to my opposite number when I was Governor of Hong Kong that there was a difference between rule by law and rule of law. The latter governed the actions of ministers and not just those of citizens.'

One very much doubts whether they cottoned on.

The nightmare of contemporary life is enshrined in the figure of Boris Johnson. He so dominates the book that he is not even in the index. No one with any political nous should call him simply Boris. He is Trump-lite. One sees the evidence on one's computer screen, if one wishes, of his appearance before the Privileges Committee, chaired by Harriet Harman.

Though deposed he is still in the public imagination. A Matt cartoon in the *Telegraph* for 18 April reads, 'Boris wouldn't ban smoking. But if he did, you know he'd be caught having a sneaky fag in Downing St. garden.' Johnson can be amusing and inventive with language, as when he thought that Scottish Independence would lead to 'Ajockalypse Now' and that his outing was 'the biggest stitch-up since the Bayeux

tapestry', but more qualifications than that are needed to hold high office. One wonders how often Johnson, who boasts of his classical background, dwells on the phrase found in the text of Juvenal, but not necessarily by him: 'quis custodiet ipsos custodes' (who watches the watchers). Bowers has accused Johnson of 'flaunting his flouting'.

This study is dominated by the distinctions between principles and law. They are not always commensurate. The principles derive from long traditions going back to classical times, boosted by the dictates of Christianity. Tell it not in Gath... lest the daughter of the Philistines rejoice, but it's worth remembering that Christianity did not just emerge from the Old Testament and the void but from centuries of reflections by *biens pensants*. After all, St. Paul, or Paul as he then was, quoted classical texts from Aratus, Menander and Epimenides. I wonder if Johnson, constantly boasting of his classical learning, ever reflected on this? One needs to recognise in our multi-cultural environment that contributions might be made by other Faiths.

In the absence of a Constitution engraved in lapidary prose there is considerable fluidity, agility, malleability and flexibility in what administrations can perform, and in the current hazy climate Bowers proposes changes which would make practices more specific. These would involve more truly independent ethics committees. He favours a number of committees, rather than, as Starmer does, a single one, since a single body would be in danger of having all the eggs in one basket.

The overarching figure in the narrative is Michael Nolan (1928-2007), who chaired the Committee on Standards in Public Life from 1994 to 1997. The Committee was set up in late 1994 by John Major's government after the cash-for-questions affair, and has conducted numerous other inquiries. Its first report in 1995 created waves by recommending full disclosure of MPs' outside interests. He also produced a report on standards of conduct in local government in July 1997. The principles embodied and articulated in the first report have since become embedded in public life in Britain, and are often referred to eponymously as the Nolan Principles.

Bowers spells the seven out. They are so obvious that it would never occur to any decent person that they should need to be written down. They are selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability openness, honesty and leadership. They stand behind the rules and assist in their interpretation. We now have bodies for keeping everything on the rails, such as the Com-

mittee on Standards in Public Life (CSPL), the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority (IPSA) the Office of the Registrar of Consultant Lobbyists (ORCL), the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (OFSTED), the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee of the House of Commons (PACAC) and The Committee on Standards in Public Life (USPL). There are numerous others.

Many political scandals involve money which undermines probity. These are regrettable of course, but they do not have high picturesque value, and the public is more arrested by scandals in which there is something concrete to grip onto. Hence the attention given to the Peter Viggers duck house and Douglas Hogg cleaning his moat during the Expenses Scandal. Think how powerful an indictment was Putin's gold lavatory brush, which was something physical and emblematic that one could register.

More recently there is the SNP funds scandal, involving a £100,000 motor-home. The catch-phrase for the manufacturer is 'Breaking all the rules.' A highly



Putin's gold lavatory brush

picturesque recent scandal is the Garden Bridge, which was expecting £30 million from the Department of Transport. Quite apart from the fact that it was going to cost some £2 million a year to run, I should regard it as an aesthetic scandal, since it is architecturally illiterate to have trees on a bridge, and an even more vainglorious project than the trees in wooden boxes in Broad Street.

The public particularly latches onto sex scandals, since these are something it can understand and imagine. Hence the vivid attention to Christine Keeler and John



The proposed Garden Bridge

Profumo, which even reached a remote shepherd I met in darkest Peloponnesia in 1963. David Mellor might now be entirely

forgotten, except that the image of him wearing a Chelsea FC shirt (not the shorts though ?) during intercourse has lodged in the collective mind for ever. He allegedly scored four times with Antonia de Sancha, but, alas, the shirt turns out to be a figment cooked up by Max Clifford. Mellor has moaned for years that he will go to his grave with the ridiculous image attached.

Another picture fixed on the cortex is Martin Thomas's selfie in Victoria's Secret shop, too raunchy to be reproduced in this magazine. And then there is Johnson and Jennifer Arcuri. The really regrettable thing is that when Lord Mayor of London he gave her £126,000 from public funds to help her business, but what we can't forget is that she installed a dancing-pole in her flat, and showed Johnson some moves. These images are powerful.

What particularly irks the public, especially if they are suffering a wet and windy holiday in Minehead, is the prospect of public figures having jollies in sunny climes. So that Evgeny Lebedev invited Johnson to Terranova in Perugia on several occasions – events described as vodka assault courses.

Bowers considers many cases in recent years where machinery has let democracy down. He marks the various committees with score-cards. There are numerous committees, but some of them are not independent, but beholden to the Prime Minister and the Cabinet. Which provided opportunities for politicians to mark their own home-work. Bowers analyses what has gone wrong, and makes a number of definite proposals.

The media has to hold wrong-doing to account, especially when the instruments of government are ineffective. *Private Eye* is cited as a publication that keeps the feet of malefactors to the fire. But even newspapers and television have not always fanned the flames vigorously enough. They could have done more over the years to pursue three of the biggest scandals in our time: the Windrush business, the victimization of the Post Office Workers and the Infected Blood disgrace.

Here are some of the problems calling for remedies. Lobbying needs more control. Carrie Johnson managed to get electronic dog collars banned in 2018. While we are on animals, it seems that Johnson, despite describing the accusation as 'rhubarb', *did* have a part to play in facilitating the evacuation of dogs from Afghanistan during the shambolic retreat. This was highly dubious, since in no circumstances should animals be prioritised over human beings. At the time of the retreat both the Foreign Secretary (Dominic Raab) and the Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office (Sir Philip Barton) were on holiday.

Second jobs for MPs has long been a contentious issue. Michael Crick believes that second jobs might be hard to police: 'For example, how could you ban book-reviews?' No problem there if one is not paid

– as is the case for this review. Unless one thinks they eat into time that should be spent on surgeries for constituents. Then there is the debate on what retired Prime Ministers should be allowed to do. Tony Blair has amassed eye-watering sums of money since retiring and David Cameron, who spoke up for probity, was involved in the Greensill scandal.

A colossal amount of exemplary work has gone into charting the downward spiral, and Bowers lists 125 helpers. One of them is Sarah Vaughan, who used her experience reporting on Westminster to write *Anatomy of a Scandal*. Fiction yes, but all too close to reality. *Downward Spiral* goes some way towards explaining why we are currently so depressed and pessimistic, sometimes needing medication. What sort of world are we living in when Andrea Jenkyns, just appointed as Education Secretary, coarsely raised her middle finger to crowds outside No. 10 and Angela Rayner called the Tories 'scum'?

The \$64,000 question is: have things got worse? Yes, possibly, but when one surveys the past, as Bowers does, corruption has been a feature of public life for a very long time. He goes back to James I, who sold knighthoods. Ermined Groundhog Day began then. This was thought at the time to be odious, and Ben Jonson, George Chapman and John Marston made fun in the play *Eastward Ho!* (1605) of his £30 Knights (about £7,500 in today's money) – which landed the first two in prison. First Gentleman: 'I ken the man weel, he's one of my thirty-pound knights.' Thinkers at the time had clear perceptions of what was involved in principles and integrity, underwritten, of course, by holy scripture and the precedence of classical philosophers. Politicians were held in suspicion, and the words associated with them – 'base' and 'fawning' – give some indication of the connotative senses. Marston was a Brasenose man, and I suppose he'd be pleased that four hundred years later someone from the college still had his eye on abuses.

It's a pity that in stage productions of *The Merchant of Venice* the two suitors for Portia before Bassano are made to look like completely ridiculous non-starters, so that one does not pay attention to what they actually say. This is the Prince of Arragon:

O, that estates, degrees and offices
Were not derived corruptly, and that
clear honour

Were purchased by the merit of the
wearer!

How many then should cover that stand
bare!

How many be commanded that
command!

How much low peasantry would then
be glean'd

From the true seed of honour ! and how
much honour

Pick'd from the chaff and ruin of the
times

To be new-varnish'd!

Quite. One wonders how much of this will get into Johnson's forthcoming book on Shakespeare. A passage such as this reminds one that Shakespeare was a sceptic.

The Speaker in 1695 John Trevor was expelled for taking a bribe of 1,000 guineas from the City of London in connection with the Orphans Bill. But there were voices raised to remind one of standards. Thomas Fuller (1654-1734) wrote, 'be ye ever so high, the law is above you.' (He is not to be confused with the more famous Thomas Fuller (1608-1661), author of *Worthies of England*). Robert Walpole (Prime Minister from 1721 to 1742) in 1712 was impeached and imprisoned for six months. Alexander Pope's *The Dunciad* presented a gloomy picture of dominant anarchy where 'universal darkness buries all.'

Coming into the nineteenth century William Hazlitt's caustic *The Spirit of the Age* (1825) regretted that the culture was bedevilled by narrow Party Spirit. It was in 1854 that Stafford H. Northcote and Charles Edward Trevelyan produced a report to make the Civil Service more professionalised as *la carrière ouverte aux talents*. It is generally regarded as the founding document of the Civil Service, defining the core values of integrity, propriety, objectivity and appointment on merit, making it possible to transfer its loyalty and expertise from one elected government to the next. Incidentally Trevelyan's descendant Laura has been planning to pay reparations for the crimes of her ancestors. This is not the place to discuss it, but the whole issue of reparations is extremely fraught and problematical.

The public perception of politics was not always benign in the Victorian period. Of which the most notorious example is Charles Dickens's Circumlocution Office, described in Chapter 10 of *Little Dorrit* (1855):

'The Circumlocution Office was (as everybody knows without being told) the most important Department under Government. No public business of any kind could possibly be done at any time without the acquiescence of the Circumlocution Office. Its finger was in the largest public pie, and in the smallest public tart. It was equally impossible to do the plainest right and to undo the plainest wrong without the express authority of the Circumlocution Office. If another Gunpowder Plot had been discovered half an hour before the lighting of the match, nobody would have been justified in saving the parliament until there had been half a score of boards, half a bushel of minutes, several sacks of official memoranda, and a family-vault full of ungrammatical correspondence, on the part of the Circumlocution Office.'

Trollope's *The Way We Live Now*

(1875) looks at the corruption in contemporary life.

In the twentieth century a high-profile figure on the naughty step is David Lloyd George. Coming nearer to our time there is the gloomy view of the governors of our society in Larkin's 'Going Going':

Despite all the land left free
For the first time I feel somehow
That it isn't going to last,

That before I snuff it, the whole
Boiling will be bricked in
Except for the tourist parts –
First slum of Europe: a role
It won't be hard to win,
With a cast of crooks and tarts.

Much of this book is bitterly amusing, and Bowers often has idiomatic turns of phrase and vocabulary to deal with the horrors. As Head of House he has to have a list of funny things to enliven after-dinner speeches. For example Rafael Behr's remark that Johnson 'turned the Cabinet into a kennel of nodding dogs' and Gráinne Maguire's observation, 'Boris Johnson Ethics Adviser sounds like something you'd have printed on a T-shirt for a stag-do.' Things fall apart then, to employ a phrase from Yeats's 'The Second Coming'. He used the image of an upwardly ascending spiral or gyre; Bowers uses the image of a downward spiral, but either way 'mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.'

BERNARD RICHARDS

An Appreciation of Opera

T.J.N. WICKENS

People sometimes ask me why I enjoy going to the opera, and the simple answer is because there is so much going on! I am sure a rock aficionado can relate to the vibrancy of a live performance compared to the recording studio soulless perfection of an album, a theatre goer can relate to the excitement of wondering how a different director will set a well known play and an art lover will always seek to place any given painting in its historical context in order to appreciate fully the work.

An operatic performance is so much more than just listening to the music, even if that is an important element, since, were it the be all and end all, one could simply go off to the concert hall and experience the same pleasure. With opera, the singers are required to perform and demonstrate their feelings in a similar way to stage actors. Indeed, one of my pet hates at the opera is a technically perfect soprano who displays no outward feeling towards the character with whom she is supposed to be in love. The existence of a chorus in most operas from the nineteenth century onwards adds to action and movement on stage. Finally, there is the set, which might be simple and austere or complex, moving and fascinating to watch. Here I should probably declare an affiliation: at the end of her career, my mother worked in the Technical Office of English National Opera, so I know a little bit about how sets are put together...(Equally true, a little knowledge is a dangerous thing!)

I believe that most lovers of 'the arts' in their widest sense would accept the broad similarity in trends across different artistic media. Romanticism is perhaps the easiest example to highlight, with different ways of doing things bringing nature and emotions to the fore in the worlds of classical music, literature and fine art, but another example would be surrealism and writing by Breton or Apollinaire and painting by Dali. The technique which changes is unique to the medium employed but the underlying sentiment or manner of looking at something differently is the same.

In many ways I find writing an opera review a similar exercise to writing a piece of literary criticism. I well remember my university professor explaining the two parts of the process: firstly, what is the author trying to do and secondly, what effect did it have on you? You have to understand what is being attempted in order to determine whether or not it is effective. The beauty of the second part of the exercise is that it is an entirely personal response. Others may not share one's opinion, but they cannot say it is wrong since only the reviewer knows how they themselves feel! My friend, Peter Schofield, former opera reviewer for this journal, was always very clear that a reviewer should express an opinion (and be prepared to justify it, of course).

There is no doubt that great opera tunes permeate our culture in ways which may not always be recognised: the helicopter gunships going in to the attack in 'Apocalypse Now' to the tune of Wagner's "March of the Valkyries" (or

for an older generation of film goers, the German bombers assembling over France in the film "Battle of Britain"), football enthusiasts who remember the Three Tenors' concert from the World Cup without necessarily knowing that 'Nessun Dorma' comes from Puccini's "Turandot" or the gentle rom-com "Pretty Woman" with its aria from "La Traviata".

So how does one get into opera? I think it is important to start with something well known as popular operas are usually popular for a reason. I started with "Carmen" and after the overture I realised it was an evening I was going to enjoy, as, to my surprise, I had recognised some of the tunes! "The Barber of Seville" and "The Marriage of Figaro" are also splendid works for beginners. I am reminded of the salutary tale of my wife, whose first experience of opera was with an enthusiast who enjoyed obscure operas which did nothing for her, and put her off going to the opera for years. There is also a similarity between appreciation of opera and fine wine: in the same way that I can appreciate a rioja is well made but it is not to my taste, there are some composers (Wagner springs to mind) who are something of an acquired taste.

Where one goes to the opera impacts one's overall impression. Glyndebourne is an occasion to dress up in black tie/evening dress and the picnic on the lawn is an integral part of the experience. English National Opera has a tradition of singing in English, supporting aspiring British artists and encouraging young people to attend, and is consequently rather less formal. La Scala in Milan is a beautiful theatre with the highest standards of performance and international stars, where people are generally smartly dressed. Covent Garden probably has the highest artistic standards in the UK but my perception is that the audience is less formally dressed than La Scala. The almost universal use of surtitles above the stage means that the language of the libretto should not be a barrier to the audience's comprehension of a work.

Turning to the two operas reviewed below and trying to put them in to a historical context, "The Escape from the Seraglio" (1782) was first performed 7 years before the storming of the Bastille whilst "The Barber of Seville" (1816) was staged just after the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815. In drama, Klinger's play "Sturm und Drang" (after which the movement is named) dates to 1777, with Schiller's "The Robbers" being published in 1781.

Mozart was definitely influential in moving opera away from the classical 18th century tradition, and "The Escape from the Seraglio" hints at the changes in store (a couple of scenes with several characters singing different words at the same time) whilst retaining the older tradition of one performer singing an aria solo centre stage. By the time of "The Barber of Seville" this style has developed much more, we have a chorus (so more movement and activity on stage) and more complex tunes and lyrics. A critic from the school of Socialist Realism would say that

“The Barber of Seville” presages the French revolution and that it shows the weakening of the aristocratic elite. Other commentators would argue that the piece is much more about the search for love and mankind’s foibles in so striving, far more universal themes and, I believe, why the opera still talks to us today.

The Barber of Seville

English National Opera, 27 February 2024

It was heartening to see the London Coliseum playing to a full house before its enforced move to Manchester (although it now seems a London “season” will be permitted) as well as seeing the number of young people in the audience. Rossini’s classic comic opera is a great way to get people into the art form, and hearing it sung in English adds to its accessibility. For the cognoscenti, this was a revival of Jonathan Miller’s wonderful 1987 production.

The opera was first performed in Rome in 1816 and is based on Beaumarchais’ play of the same name. Count Almaviva, a Spanish nobleman, is wooing Rosina, the ward of the unscrupulous Dr Bartolo, who has designs on marrying her himself. The count engages Figaro, a barber, to assist him in his quest. The count seeks to conceal his true identity from Rosina, preferring to be known as the humble ‘Lindoro’. Figaro arranges for the count to access Bartolo’s house in the guise of a soldier who has been billeted there. This allows the pair to declare their love for each other, and after a series of comic adventures (music lessons, army bursting in for breach of the peace, elopement thwarted by removal of ladder) Figaro outwits the doctor and Rosina and the count sign a marriage contract.

Visually, the production is a treat, from the opening scene with the chorus serenading at Rosina’s window, to the stylish interior with the window on which so much attention is lavished. The cast wore period costumes, and reactions around me suggested that the audience did not need modern dress in order to relate to the story. Clearly a lot of thought had been given to where the characters were placed on stage to optimise the comic effects (eg the isolation of Bartolo alone on one side of the stage with everyone else huddled together on the opposite wing, the coming together and separation of the count and Rosina depending on how asleep Bartolo appears to be, the farcical way Don Basilio (the music teacher) is shoed out of the room but comes back, crawling under the piano, to pick up the last bag of coins). This is ‘opera bouffa’: Don Basilio’s hat is far too large and it’s comical; the repetition by the Count, impersonating a music teacher, of ‘peace and joy be with you for ever’ and the elaborate leg kick, is meant to be funny and we can laugh at Bartolo’s growing exasperation.

Charles Rice’s Figaro had all of the swagger and self confidence of the great fixer which he is. I liked soprano Anna Devin’s Rosina both for her voice and her characterisation, but was a little puzzled by the pre-performance announcement that she had a cold and asked for the audience’s “understanding”. There really did not seem to be a problem (but perhaps she was unsure that this would be the case? Although if she were badly affected, then surely the stand in would step up?) I thought bass Alastair Miles (Don Basilio) had a lovely voice with mellow tones and plenty of character, whilst Lesley Garrett (the maid) hammed it up beautifully, Yorkshire accent to the fore, right at the end conveying so clearly that despite losing Rosina the doctor need not be bereft of female company. I thought Innocent Masuko grew in to the role of the Count, and appeared to enjoy the various disguises he had to undertake. I fear his voice did not come across as strongly as some of the other characters.

My main criticism of ENO debutant director Roderick Cox was that the blend of orchestra and singer was not always there, with the orchestra sometimes being too loud to hear the very fast and very funny libretto (indeed, Amanda and Anthony Holden’s translation is one of the joys of the evening). This spoiled for me one of my favourite arias, Figaro’s opening speech (“Figaro here” etc).

It would be invidious to pick a favourite moment, as there were

several: I loved the scene when the Count pretends to be the replacement music teacher and can’t get Bartolo’s name right (“Dr Bungalow?” “Dr Barnardo?” “Dr Bastardo?”), also the scene when Figaro is trying to urge the Count and Rosina to leave via the window as they exchange prolonged sweet nothings with the result that the ladder has been removed by the time they reach the window. The total unexpectedness of the officer of the watch, hitherto unspoken, saying to his squaddies in the plumiest of accents “back orf chaps!” was tremendous! I enjoyed too the in jokes about ‘modern’ music (“in my day, the male lead was a soprano...”).

This was a revival which has stood the test of time. The production is enormous fun and the cast looked to be enjoying themselves, which is always contagious. Works do not become “classics” without good cause....

The Escape from the Seraglio

La Scala, Milan, 29 February 2024

Mozart’s “Escape from the Seraglio” was first performed in Vienna in 1782 and is part of the classical 18th century operatic tradition. That is to say, there are a number of arias performed solo on stage to showcase the artist’s talent (particularly true here of Konstanze, who is required to demonstrate an extraordinary vocal range), there is no chorus to speak of and so almost by default the action is very static. Yet in this work one can see that things are starting to change: the last scene in the second Act has the two pairs of lovers singing different refrains centre stage at the same time and the last scene of Act 3 has everyone praising the clemency and wisdom of the Pasha. Yet overall one is reminded of Mozart’s earlier ‘Lucio Silla’ far more than his slightly later ‘Marriage of Figaro’.

As for the plot, Konstanze has been captured by pirates and separated from her lover, the Spanish nobleman Belmonte, and finds herself in the harem of Selim Pasha. The latter desires Konstanze but will not use force to attain her, he wants her to come to him of her own volition, but she remains true to Belmonte. The Pasha’s harem is guarded by Osmin, who is in love with Konstanze’s maid, Blonde, who in turn, is in love with Osmin’s bitter rival, the gardener Pedrillo. Belmonte arrives at the gates of the Pasha’s palace to be confronted by Osmin but with Pedrillo’s help, he manages to enter the palace and be reunited with Konstanze. However, their plans to escape are thwarted and the two pairs of lovers (Konstanze and Belmonte, Blonde and Pedrillo) await their fate at the Pasha’s hands. It then transpires that Belmonte is the son of the Pasha’s bitterest enemy and cause of great misfortune, so they fear his wrathful vengeance. However, the Pasha considers it supreme to repay an injustice with goodness rather than to return evil for evil and orders them to be taken to their boat, free to leave, at which there is widespread rejoicing (Osmin apart) at the Pasha’s clemency.

Director Giorgio Strehler opted for period costumes which worked well but frankly the set was disappointing. It was very simple, which is not in itself a problem, but the lighting was distinctly odd in that the front of the stage, where the singers perform much of the time, was in shadow whereas the middle was illuminated normally. Initially I wondered if characters sung about their dark times (being separated from their love) in the dark part of the stage and moved to the middle when there was a hope of something more positive, but this theory was not supported by actions later in the work. Almost the only time the whole stage was illuminated was in Act 2 when Konstanze sings of her resolution to remain faithful to Belmonte in spite of the Pasha’s threats, which is hard to categorise as the most uplifting part of the story! I fear some unintentional humour may have crept in with the silhouette of a sailing ship jerkily moving across the horizon; once my companion had pointed out the similarity with ‘Captain Pugwash’ I could not get it out of my mind... However, it was not all bad. The arrival of the Pasha’s ship at the dockside attended by his Janissaries was visually impressive, and the requisite humour was extracted from the ladders going up to the rooms of the ladies to be rescued.

Conductor Thomas Guegeis exercised great control over the

orchestra, particularly in respect of the balance of sound between the orchestra and the singers (a marked contrast with the ENO production earlier in the week, notwithstanding La Scala having a larger orchestra).

The quality of the singing was high. Soprano Jessica Pratt's Konstanze has several arias to showcase her upper range, which she did effortlessly. However, I was less convinced by her characterisation: for example, she gave no visual indication that she was moved by the arrival of the man for whom she has allegedly spent years pining. I preferred Jasmin Delfs' Blonde, whose voice I liked as much as Pratt's but whose acting skills were far higher (and surely part of the enjoyment of opera is that marriage of singing and acting?). Tenor Daniel Behle gave a good performance as Belmonte. The role of Selim Pasha is a spoken part only and was convincingly portrayed by Sven-Erich Bechtolf, a respected German stage actor as well as opera stage director. However, my favourite was English bass Peter Rose's Osmin. Rose specialises in comic roles and was brilliant here, from the initial elaborate exaggerated rolling gait when we first see him to the tetchy sulk and tantrum at the end when his plans are thwarted. Plus he had a lovely voice.

I should also add that a native German with whom we were sharing our box commented most favourably on the clarity of the cast's German pronunciation.

This was an enjoyable evening. I shall remember Osmin for a long time, and the blend between orchestra and singers was excellent. This piece lacks the action and complexity of Mozart's later works, but it is fascinating to see it as a stepping stone towards what happens later as it was discernibly different to *Lucio Silla*.

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Not the *Gazette*

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CONTRIBUTORS TO THIS ISSUE

Don Carleton is a retired senior administrator in the University of Bristol charged with assessing and improving where possible the University’s internal and external communications and relationships • Robert Foley is Leverhulme Professor Emeritus and Fellow of King’s College, Cambridge • G.R. Evans was Professor of Medieval Theology and Intellectual History at Cambridge • Bernard Richards is an Emeritus Fellow of Brasenose College • Tim Wickens is an Opera enthusiast and friend of the late Peter Schofield, who reviewed opera for *Oxford Magazine*